

Studying (Un)civilized States: Drawing the Borders of Globalization in Study Abroad

Salma Edrif, Dar Si Hmad for Development, Education and Culture and École nationale de commerce et de gestion d'Agadir

Rebecca L. Farnum, Dar Si Hmad for Development, Education and Culture and Department of Geography, King's College London

Jade Lansing, Dar Si Hmad for Development, Education and Culture

Introduction

New technologies and the spread of the internet have created the possibility to virtually “visit” a country down to the street. Our expectations of a country and/or a people are shaped by the clichés exposed on the web. Prior to my visit to London, I pictured my interactions during my UK experience to be only with British people, yet my first interaction on British soil was in fact with an Iraqi Uber driver who also happens to own multiple car service businesses in Morocco and knew of my hometown. Globalization both narrowed my expectations of the UK and broadened them at the same time.

(Salma Edrif, reflecting on globalization following an academic trip to London)

Globalization is generally assumed to undermine the Westphalian system dominated by nation-states, erasing national boundaries and giving birth to a new, global form of citizenship. Practitioners and politicians alike herald study abroad as vital to preparing the next generation to succeed in an interconnected world and champion social justice for all of the world's citizens. Students are sent away from home universities for education abroad with promises of gaining new and invaluable global perspectives, making lifelong friends from around the world, and learning more about themselves.

In practice, though, American and European study abroad programs often reify states—rather than local or transnational contexts and communities—as the central framework of global education, especially in developing contexts. In marketing and implementation, study abroad is generally framed as experiencing a national reality, affirming states and state imaginations as the appropriate lens for encounters with the foreign “rather than

the geohistorical and political making and re-making of (already hybrid) cultures” (Andreotti et al., 2010). Participants “discover Morocco” rather than exploring middle-class Marrakechi culture or investigating Mediterranean continuities and variances.

This state-centric approach results in study abroad destinations being classified as “civilized” (or, all too frequently, “uncivilized”) through the lens of state power rather than more local realities. Few programs explicitly address the different experiences of globalization encountered around the world—experiences that vary between members within the same household and even more across an entire nation. The language of study abroad is itself bound in disparate geographies. “Study abroad” generally denotes North American and European students going overseas for coursework, while individuals from the Global South enrolled in Western universities are simply “pursuing education” (Handler, 2016).

This framing is harmful to both participants and hosting communities, tacitly supporting global inequalities (Andreotti et al., 2010; Andreotti and de Souza, 2012; Jefferess, 2008) and constraining possibilities for local practitioners based on neocolonial expectations. Research shows that intentionality (Pedersen, 2010), pedagogy (Engle and Engle, 2002; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige, 2009), and program duration (Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou, 2012) affect whether engaging in study abroad has transformative impacts on participants’ intercultural competencies. When these factors are not considered, program takeaways may be negligible or negative—despite the good faith efforts of practitioners.

Study abroad marketing and programming both shape and are shaped by discourses of globalization, particularly in the absence of critical reflection on how borders, institutions, and ideas come to be packaged together. Via checkpoints, legal régimes, funding packages, and diplomatic representatives, states continue to be substantial actors and stakeholders in American and European study abroad industries. Bundles of notions about common cultures and characteristics that form state imaginaries likewise construct and constrain the possibilities of study abroad, especially as they impact student experiences and assumptions. Both overlapping and divergent, the state and state imaginary are thus foundational to mainstream study abroad as presently practiced.

The necessity of applying for a visa, the physical infrastructure of border control, and potential restrictions for non-citizens (on rights to work, rent property, access services, etc.) all serve as overt reminders of the state's power and position. These approaches to education abroad shape students' perspectives, implying dichotomies and boundaries, constructing sameness and difference, and leaving a lasting impression on student minds (Douglas and Jones-Rikkens, 2001; Paige et al., 2009). Subsequent experiences and interactions become embodiments of the "Other," suggested and reinforced by study abroad programs.

This piece is based on a recently published article in the *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* exploring how study abroad has become a form of statecraft in the Westphalian system (Lansing and Farnum, 2017). Here, we highlight some of the diverse ways in which globalization plays out in education abroad for various parties. Insights are drawn primarily from an Ethnographic Field School based in Agadir and Sidi Ifni (Southwest Morocco). Our primary author, Salma Edrif, is a Moroccan university student who serves as a Speaking Partner for the School and has traveled overseas herself for academic conferences. In addition to her theoretical contributions to the main text, first person narratives of her particular experiences with globalization are given in italics to exemplify arguments.

The borders of cultural exchange

Morocco has become an increasingly popular destination for students from the USA, Europe, and Western Africa, particularly in the wake of instabilities making study in other regional destinations less accessible. For a relatively small country (both in terms of geography and demography), Morocco is a major study abroad destination: in 2015, more American students studied in Morocco than any other Arabic-speaking country (Institute for International Education, 2016). Of the roughly sixty-eight countries in the Middle East and Africa, only Israel and South Africa receive more study abroad participants annually (IIE, 2016).

Students from North America, Europe, and the UK are permitted to enter Morocco without a visa for stays up to three months. Both of this paper's American authors regularly enter and exit the country with little hassle. Moroccan students, on the other hand, cannot travel or study in these countries without going through a costly and exacting visa process.

The world being a small village implies a theoretical abolition of borders between states. International citizenship is supposed to guarantee ease of mobility for the citizens of the world, regardless of origin or destination. However, as a Moroccan, attending an environmental conference at Oxford University proved no such ease of travel or exchange.

Applying for a visa to visit the UK as a Moroccan involves a complicated process of paperwork, several trips across the country, and significant non-refundable fees, paid whether the visa is granted or rejected. The process begins with an online application that requires the disclosure of information regarding the applicant's personal life, marital and family situation, travel history, criminal record, parents' names and nationalities, employment and/or academic situation, income statements and annual expenditures, accommodation and extended family liaisons in the UK, visit purpose and plans and intention, and any affiliation with terrorist groups, etc. Subsequently, a physical file submission appointment at the British consulate in Rabat is set to assess the applicant's financial and personal stability and ability to support themselves while in the UK. At this stage, there is a nonrefundable fee of ~\$150 US [the equivalent of 100 hours of work at Morocco's minimum wage]. Two weeks later, a second appointment is set to retrieve the applicant's passport, which may or may not contain the visa stamp. For applicants coming from the South or East of the country, these appointments require overnight accommodation and at least twenty hours of public bus transit each way.

Going through Moroccan borders, I was required to narrate the contents of my visa documents at every stage of the security process and explain the purpose of a "Conservation Optimism" conference. Upon arrival in London, the exact purpose, itinerary, and duration of my visit were likewise of utmost interest to a mass of security personnel.

Globalization has made the world smaller in some senses, but not everyone encounters distances shrunk to the same degree. For most Moroccans, the distance between them and the UK is far greater than the distance between London and Agadir for a British national. Borders, boundaries, and barriers remain unequal—perhaps even more so than they were previously. Globalization is not singular in experience or impact, and to ignore this undermines the very premises of equitable exchange.

Globalization and civilization's Others

A central tenet of globalization is that today the fates of citizens across the globe are more interconnected than they have ever been. Within this reality, study abroad has been posited as a “bridge” between disparate cultures and contexts, equipping students with the skills and sensitivities needed to facilitate a peaceful and prosperous international ecosystem. Yet, the bridge of international study often tilts one-way, projecting American and British educational models and expectations onto developing contexts. At times blatantly and elsewhere inadvertently, these contexts and the diverse communities within them are framed as recipients of, rather than active players in, a linear progression toward civilization.

Local practitioners in Morocco, for example, frequently confront students, faculty, and university administrators committed to the imaginaries of Morocco highlighted in marketing; satisfying “customers” requires making concessions to appeal to these narratives (Lansing and Farnum, 2017). For example, a 2015–2016 Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) recalled how stakeholders engaged in this marketing during their placement in Morocco:

Host families get paid by study abroad programs who are paid by wide-eyed American students looking for an “authentic” Moroccan experience... The placement in the medina [historic walled sector of the city] and the emphasis that the host family is where we’re guaranteed to have a “true Moroccan experience” perpetuate the image of Morocco as “exotic” or “different.” I’m wondering if [the program provider] would have pressed this image as much if, say, we were staying in a trendy apartment next to the Morocco Mall...

I have felt the effects of these study abroad expectations. In my work with Dar Si Hmad’s Ethnographic Field School as an assistant and speaking partner, I’ve spent some time with visiting North American student groups. Program orientation sessions for students visiting the country for the first time unfold the exotic expectations students have of Morocco, mainly fueled by marketing campaigns for study abroad. On personal hygiene conditions, I have been asked if “Moroccans know about washing machines.”

Even though it is the obvious consequence of globalization, visitors often express their surprise as to how advanced my English skills are, and bigger is their surprise when I say that I acquired a further two foreign languages independently using open source materials online. They forget that globalization has the global aspect and is not something entirely exclusive to North Americans and Europeans.

However, this somewhat stereotypical point of view is not entirely wrong: thirty-two percent of Moroccans are illiterate (HCP, 2017). In my community, many aspects of globalization are a privilege accessible only to the educated and young who are able to a) access and use digital communication tools and b) speak foreign languages. While Dar Si Hmad's Field School seeks to engage local community members in equitable exchange, local university students must engage with international visitors using a foreign tongue rather than their native Tachelhit or Darija; experiencing this form of globalization is thus exclusive to the educated youth able to communicate in English.

Study abroad programming in/for a globalized world

Study abroad has been heralded by practitioners, participants, and politicians alike as a critical component of university education. The sentiment that globalization “makes it imperative that more students study abroad” is widely accepted (Institute for International Education, 2017). Many in the study abroad industry portray the experience as a unique “milestone along the way to developing the all-important global mindset necessary to thrive in today’s global world,” enhancing skillsets and career opportunities (IIE, 2017). Many researchers reiterate this rhetoric, with findings suggesting that even short-term programs have “lasting educational effects on students” (Ritz, 2011; Ismail et al., 2006).

A growing counter-narrative pushes for greater clarity on how the specifics of program structure and curriculum are impacting students’ learning abroad and dialogue about the core aims of sending students overseas for study (Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou, 2012; Coleman, 2013). In this narrative, the value of study abroad lies in challenging students to interpret critically how their localized experiences fit into broader global trends and “question the very structure and processes that have afforded them the opportunity to participate in the study experience” (Davies and Pike, 2009: 74).

Unfortunately, with noteworthy exceptions, too few programs encourage this critical approach. Part of the presumed worth of study abroad is in teaching students to adapt to foreign and multicultural environments (Haddad, 1997), yet much of programming is structured in ways that reflect sending universities' expectations more than local contexts. Limited or unnuanced exposure to other cultures may cause substantial bias when interacting with host communities (Lee and Krugly-Smolka, 1999). Study abroad practitioners must provide the context and theory necessary for students to turn base observations into thoughtful questions and reflections that nourish critical analysis of the inherent assumptions and biases that frame worldviews. Critical approaches to global education should encourage students to deconstruct their own experiences, presenting a dynamic—rather than self-evident—world.

Too often in study abroad and global education curricula, well-intended discourses serve to Other, control, demonize, or flatten dynamic regions (Andreotti et al., 2010; Andreotti and de Souza, 2012; Jefferess, 2008). Instead of making local hosts recognizably individual in narrations of time abroad, they become stand-ins for state poverty and the ugly underbelly of global inequalities (Lewin, 2009: XV; Woolf, 2013). In order to live up to their potential, study abroad programs must avoid these missteps by giving further voice to host communities in the narration of their cultures and livelihoods: via program schedules, yes, but just as critically through their naming, framing, and underlying value systems.

Conclusion

If practitioners truly intend to meet the stated goals of study abroad, it is not enough to push students out the door with a “just do it” attitude assuming any international experience will positively impact students' values and behaviors. At its best, the experience of living and studying surrounded by a different way of life, under a different legal system, perhaps in a different language, is humbling. It is interdisciplinary and reflexive, pushing students to reflect on their communities of origin, mainstream narratives of other cultures portrayed in the media, and the predetermined categories that have hitherto shaped how they see the world. At its worst, though, study abroad reinforces biases and stereotypes and reproduces global power imbalances (see Andreotti et al., 2010; Bochner and Furnham, 1986; Boatler, 1992; Jefferess, 2008; Lee and Krugly-Smolka, 1999; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, and Paige, 2009).

International study practitioners must think critically about how to frame student experiences and encourage students to question those framings. As Vande Berg suggests, “Students learn effectively only if we intervene before, during and after their experiences abroad” (quoted in Lederman (2007); see also Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2012)). Further critical reflection is needed on the powerful and problematic possibilities of state-centric study abroad and the lasting impact of particular framings on all stakeholders.

Additional consideration should also be given to who makes decisions about program curriculum, activities, and scheduling (Davies and Pike, 2009: 73). Study abroad sector realities mean that practitioners are often pressured to build programs based on the interests of foreign students, the administrative requirements of home universities, and foreign policy agendas. Inclusive discussion among study abroad providers, educational administrators, host communities, and participants is vital to maximizing potential and ensuring that practices and takeaways are in dialogue *with* host communities. Such programs would push young learners beyond affirmations of existing narratives to seek new questions and break down hegemonic centers of knowledge production.

Study abroad gives cause for cautious optimism (Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou, 2012: xii). As the world becomes increasingly globalized and the fates of the world’s citizens ever more connected, the need for pedagogy exposing students to different cultures, languages, and ways of life is pressing. But exposure in and of itself does not challenge the global hierarchies, inequalities, biases, and hostilities that face today’s world. Creating programs that allow students to confront these realities with openness and authenticity is difficult and “must be earned, not purchased” (Engle and Engle, 2002: 37). For the impact of study abroad on students and the societies in which they live to be truly transformative, programs must shift from packaging and selling “states” to encouraging participants to challenge the very borders and categorizations shaping their experiences.

These programs do carry with them the potential of creating more critically thinking and accepting generations by breaking barriers between groups from different cultures and inviting us all to discover authenticities beyond assumed stereotypes — including within ourselves. By assisting student groups in their travels and classes here in Morocco, I have discovered places in and facts about my country I would not have otherwise encountered.

However, these positive opportunities are only realized when programs are specific, intentionally engaged with local realities, and non-generalizing in their content. Such initiatives encourage mutual understanding and bear benefits to both visitors and locals, making the most of globalization and cosmopolitan ideals without ignoring systemic injustices.

Study abroad has the potential to stimulate the kind of questions and actions necessary to move toward a more equitable and peaceful global future; they simply need to be asked.